



Box Turtles in Alabama

By *Bennett Moseley*, Wildlife Biologist, Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries Division,
Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources

Box turtles are common in most parts of Alabama, even though there has been a decline in population numbers in recent decades. They can often be observed after a summer rain along rural roadsides and near forested areas. Box turtles have a unique, hinged plastron — the lower portion of the shell — that allows the turtle to close its shell almost completely, providing an excellent escape from any would-be predators.

Two of the most common subspecies in Alabama are the Eastern box turtle (*Terrapene carolina*) and the Gulf Coast box turtle (*Terrapene carolina major*). The Eastern box turtle is usually four to six inches long with four toes and a brightly marked upper shell, or carapace. The Gulf Coast box turtle is the largest of these subspecies measuring five to seven inches in length with four toes. The carapace is usually an olive drab and not as brightly marked. Both subspecies have steep, keeled, high-domed upper shells with variable markings. Their jaws are slightly hooked and the toes are only slightly webbed.

Males of both subspecies can usually be distinguished from females by the concaved depression found on the lower shell or plastron. Males are usually larger and have thicker, longer tails. They will normally have red irises while

females have yellowish-brown irises. Both males and females occupy woodlands and pastures and are usually found near streams or ponds.

Mating season usually begins in the spring and continues throughout the summer. Males have been known to mate with several different females or one female several times over a period of years. It is possible for a female to lay fertile eggs up to four years after a successful mating. Both Eastern box turtles and Gulf Coast box turtles have distinct courtship rituals. Nesting usually occurs from May to July. A nest is usually dug in sandy soil using the strong hind legs of the female. Eggs are carefully laid in the nest and covered. Clutch sizes vary from three to eight eggs, and females may lay several clutches each year. Incubation is usually three months but can vary depending on soil temperature.

Box turtles are long-lived reptiles and may live for more than a hundred years. Their flesh has been consumed as food; however, they are dangerous to eat because their diet consists of mushrooms that may be toxic to humans. These toxins may remain in their flesh for long periods. Box turtles are omnivorous, feeding on insects as well as berries, fungi, worms, roots, slugs, flowers, frogs, salamanders, and snakes. They

will eat eggs indiscriminately and have been observed eating carrion.

Population numbers of these turtles have been declining in recent decades largely due to habitat destruction. Much of this loss can be attributed to residential construction, highways, and commercial developments. Roads also present a great hazard to turtles, with large numbers lost to automobiles each year. Another possible reason for this decline in population might be attributed to the increase in the illegal pet trade of reptiles and amphibians.

Alabama has adopted regulations protecting many animals, including box turtles, against this illegal trade. These regulations make it unlawful to offer for sale or trade anything of value for any box turtle, box turtle part, or reproductive product. This is definitely a step in the right direction and it is hoped that future research on habitat and environmental needs will further protect these subspecies of box turtles. In the meantime, a kind act such as safely removing one from the road might go a long way in preserving these animals for future generations.

For more information contact Bennett Moseley, Area Biologist, Kinterbish WMA, P.O. Box 207, Ward, AL 36922, or visit www.outdooralabama.com. ☐